What Are Little Boys Made Of?

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Abstract

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by
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Psychology 3

Atlee stopped writing, his pen hovering above his paper, listening to the school bus crunch along the gravel road. Richie was home.

Swearing quietly, Atlee tossed his pen down and reached for another cigarette. He inhaled deeply and listened. If it was a good day, Richie would scamper up the stairs and go right to his room to read until supper. If not, well, Leticia would be up threatening to quit if something wasn’t done, or Joyce would be crying in his arms asking, what more could she do, for god’s sakes?

So he smoked and sweated and waited.

Footsteps were coming up the stairs, light and fast. Then the door to his library swung open and Richie sauntered in. Atlee ignored him by picking up one of his pages and proofreading, hoping he would wander out again without any trouble. Stealing a look at his son from under half-closed lids, he wondered how the boy could look so much like his tall, lithe mother and still be so unlike her.

Richie came over to the desk and picked up a paperweight, examining it casually. Then he put it back down.

"Father," he announced, "I have a new friend."

Reluctantly, Atlee looked up. "That’s nice, son." Richie had no friends. There were no children within walking distance, and the kids at school left him alone after the novelty of his stories wore off.

"His name is Shrug. He wants to know if he can live in our tool shed." Richie trained his blue eyes on his father.

Nobody should have eyes like that, Atlee thought. Least of all, a seven year old kid. "What about his parents? What would they say?"
"He hasn't got any parents. I found him and he wants to live in our tool shed. Can he?"

Carefully, his father asked, "What does this Shrug look like?"

Richie's eyes glittered. "He's tall and very strong with lots of hair and teeth and his eyes are—"

"Richie, I've warned you!"

"You asked me," Richie said coldly.

Atlee stubbed his cigarette out and rubbed his temples. "All right. I asked you. I'm sorry."

"Can he stay?"

Atlee hesitated a minute. This was one of Richie's better stories. Maybe he was outgrowing it. "All right, he can stay. Provided," he added, "there's no trouble. Understand?"

Richie smiled. "Oh, yes, Father. I understand." He left silently.

For a long time Atlee stared at the empty doorway. Then Leticia appeared in it, her lips compressed into a thin line.

"Come in," he said, wishing she'd go away. He waved her to a chair.

She ignored his gesture. "Mr. Atlee, Richie just made nine bologna sandwiches for someone named Shrug who is taking up residence in our tool shed." She waited for his reaction.

"I know all about it. Shrug is Richie's imaginary friend." He spoke lightly, trying to make it sound natural. Lots of kids had imaginary friends.

"Nine bologna sandwiches are hardly imaginary," Leticia pointed out.

But not like Shrug, Atlee finished his thought. "OK, Leticia, I'll speak to him about it at supper."

She nodded and started to leave, then swung around to face him again, surprisingly graceful for a woman whose
heft told the story of good food overly sampled. ‘‘Mr. Atlee, if this is going to be another of Richie’s, uh, incidents, I’m afraid I’ll have to—’’

Atlee cut her off. ‘‘It won’t be, Leticia. I promise I’ll take care of it.’’ He couldn’t blame her. Leticia was superstitious anyway, always crossing herself whenever there was a chance of offending some higher-up personage, or tossing salt over her shoulder, things a grown woman should know better than to believe in.

‘‘I promise,’’ he repeated, and Leticia, only partially placated, went muttering back to the kitchen.

No, really he couldn’t blame Leticia. After hearing Richie expound on a certain type of rats that ran in packs and considered human flesh a delicacy, Leticia had insisted on sleeping with the downstairs light on. Atlee had grumbled, but the light remained on.

Come to think of it, in the past Richie had actually sought her out, knowing that she was the most susceptible to his tales. Like the time he found the body in the field next to Mrs. Henderson’s house down the road. He’d gone straight to Leticia with his description. When Atlee found her, she was almost in hysterics. Something about the birds tearing bits of grey flesh and eyeball off the dead man. They had even called the police that time. Of course, there was no body.

He lit a cigarette and tried to push it out of his mind. He had a novel to write, and at this rate he’d be dead before it was finished. He reread the couple of paragraphs on the top of the page and was getting back into the plot when a ‘‘Yoohoo, Leticia’’ and the yap of a dog drifted through his open window.

He groaned. His old English professor had told him that if he wanted to be a full time writer he had to either learn to dislike eating or marry rich. It was a good thing he’d married rich. He’d starve at the rate he was working,
and he wasn’t going to get anything else accomplished today. Mrs. Henderson had a voice that could penetrate a bomb shelter, and that pile of fur she called a dog had a bark like a dentist’s drill. Hey, maybe that was it? A dog for Richie. It might be exactly what he needed. Not a Yorkshire, but a large dog—maybe an Irish Setter. He made a mental note to talk to Joyce about it after supper. Congratulating himself, he closed the window and went downstairs.

Dinner was usually eaten in silence, a house rule requested by Richie’s mother. Sometimes Richie said things that bothered the appetite. Everyone else’s. Richie always ate like a starving man.

Atlee watched him wolfing down his food and thought, nothing ever bothers him. Even his own stories. They never had, even when Richie was younger. There were no cries in the night from this child. Was it possible to be born without fear? And if he was afraid, where behind those dead-fish blue eyes was it hidden?

Finally, Atlee said. “Richie, Shrug will have to find a smorgasbord somewhere else.”

Joyce Atlee stopped eating. She shot a quick apprehensive glance at her son and asked, “Who’s Shrug?”

“Richie’s imaginary friend, who is staying in our tool shed, but,’’ he added firmly, “is not being fed by us.’’

“If I don’t feed him, he’ll have to hunt on his own. He’s carnivorous, you know.’’ Richie made it sound like a threat.

“Tell him to go right ahead.’’

“OK, but don’t blame me when these things start to happen. I warned you.’’

“We’re not feeding him, and that’s final!’’ Why did he always end up shouting, threatening his son? He went back to eating, biting down until he felt the metal of the fork click against his teeth.

“I’d better go tell Shrug then, so he won’t be disappointed when breakfast doesn’t come.’’ Richie got up.

“It’s getting dark, honey. Take a flashlight,’’ his mother said.
Richie padded out of the room as if he hadn't heard. His father watched him go. Damn! The boy moved like a cat. If you weren't watching him closely, he could come and go in the time it took to blink.

He turned back to find Joyce staring at him. "Jim, is this another of Richie's escapades?"

"Come on, Joyce, This isn't as bad as some of the others he's come up with. Maybe he's outgrowing these stories. Maybe it's just a phase kids like that go through."

"Maybe," Joyce said quietly, "he needs professional help."

"Oh, Christ," he threw down his fork. "We've been all through this before. He's just a kid."

"Just a kid? He's got an I.Q. in the 160 range. Jim, he's not just a kid. He understands more than we ever give him credit for." She got up abruptly and came around the table to stand by him. "Look at his eyes sometime, Jim, and tell me he's just a kid."

Atlee made an effort to speak slowly and calmly. "The only thing a shrink can do is tell Richie that he's passionately in love with you, and charge us outrageously for it."

"Money! You're always harping about money! This is your son!"

"Oh sure, look who's talking about being money-phobic. Who's always giving him money?" She touched a raw spot.

"The only time he even looks at me is when I'm giving him his allowance, or when he's telling me one of those, . . . those stories." She choked and turned away, unwilling to have him see her red-eyed and shaking.

But Atlee was ruthless. "And we know what he does with his money. He goes out and buys those goddamned science-fiction and occult magazines that started this whole mess!"

She whirled on him. "Oh, no you don't! You're not blaming me for this. He first learned to read in YOUR
library. Who was it that kept feeding him Bradbury and Poe? Who was it that encouraged him to write his own little cute stories? It wasn’t me, my friend.”

They glared at each other. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry.” He shook his head as if to clear it.

“It wasn’t your fault, Jim.” She came over and put her arms around his head. “It wasn’t anybody’s fault. How were we to know? We were so thrilled to have a genius son.” She laughed. It was a bitter, hollow sound. “A genius,” she repeated. She held him tightly for a second, then released him.

“You know, you’re right about the shrink, Jim. It’s too late to do anything about it now. You can’t even reach him if he doesn’t want to be reached. He hardly ever talks, even at school. His teacher told me that all the other little geniuses ignore him.” Her eyes seemed tired. “Sometimes I think that what I see of Richie is just a cardboard picture of a little boy, that there’s no little boy in him at all, just that picture.”

Atlee stood up to hold her. “I know,” he said softly into her hair. “I know.”

Richie walked unafraid down the stone path that led to the tool shed, swinging a flashlight in time with his steps. He whistled the soft song of a sparrow expertly, and listened as one sleepy bird answered. He could do all the local birds. Sometimes it was amusing to hide in the bushes that lined the path and watch the birds land close to him, no doubt wondering where the phantom bird was.

He stopped in front of the tool shed and paused to recall the combination of the master lock. Instantly, the numbers were clear in his mind. He swung open the door and stepped inside, his eyes searching the darkness.

“Shrug,” he called softly. The wind rustled some dry leaves. Richie peered into one corner. “Oh, there you are.” He switched off the flashlight—Shrug hated the light—and spoke into the darkness.
"Dad says you've got to find your own food.' He listened in the silence. "Yes, I know. There isn't much. We're too close to the city for there to be any large wildlife, but Dad thinks you're a parasite and says you're not going to live off him." He paused again. "No, of course I don't think you're a parasite." He was thoughtful for a minute. "More of a symbiosis, wouldn't you say?"

He waited a long moment. "Well, I suppose I could leave the door open at night, but it would have to be locked in the morning before I leave for class." His lips twisted slightly as he said "class." "But it has to be that way. If my parents found you, they'd, ..." he paused and thought again, analyzing the situation. "They'd probably try to kill you. You're not strong enough yet, so we have to avoid a confrontation until you are. And if they try then," the thought coiled and struck in his mind almost before he was even aware of it. "Then we'd have to . . . take care of it. A euphemism, Shrug. You'll understand when the time comes."

He turned towards the door and said, "I'll leave the door open tonight." He looked out at the darkening sky. "Good. It's overcast, and a full moon isn't due until the end of the month." He swung back. "I'll be back tomorrow morning." He smiled. "Good hunting."

Richie walked back up the garden steps, the tool shed door gaping silently behind him.

The man kept wandering over a dozen different topics. Atlee couldn't seem to pin him down, to let him say what the story line strongly urged him to say, so he gave up.

Self-characterization, he thought. Someone else can't pin down what's bothering him either. He got up to close the window. It was clearly autumn now, and when the sun started to fall, it grew cold quickly. There were no birds singing. Come to think of it, maybe that's what was bothering him. It had been damnably quiet lately. Richie hadn't mentioned Shrug for days. He'd come home from
school, changed his clothes, and gone outside to play with Shrug, but he hadn't said a word. The calm has more tension than the storm. Maybe. If not, there was a helluva hurricane coming up when this Shrug business broke loose.

Joyce must feel it too. She paced the house, refusing to leave and drive into the city, but wasn't able to explain why she felt bound to the estate. And Leticia was silent. Even her grumblings had dwindled to almost nothing. But her eyes searched every corner of a room when she entered, and she never kept her back to the door.

The phone jangled. Atlee tensed, waiting for Leticia to announce the call. Seconds passed and there was no sound. He exhaled slowly and grabbed for a cigarette. It must have been for Leticia. Time for a gossip session.

Time for a writing session, he told himself. There was no putting it off anymore. This chapter was due to be mailed off at the end of this week.

"Do something," he told his protagonist. "Anything!" He tapped his pen against his desk. His hero ignored him and continued to run amuck. Atlee was almost grateful for the sound of lumbering footsteps advancing on him. He looked up.

Leticia stood in the doorway, wringing invisible moisture out of a dish towel. Her plump face quivered. For one puzzled moment Atlee thought that she was angry beyond words. Then he realized, good god, she's going to cry.

"Mr. Atlee, I hate to bother you." She gestured towards the pile of papers on his desk. Without waiting for him to reply, she went on. "Could I please have the rest of the night off? Eva, I mean Mrs. Henderson, just called and she's terribly upset, just terribly, and I don't blame her one bit, sir, that dog was her whole life after George died, George being her husband, and now—"

"Leticia," he interrupted just loud enough to be sure she quit rambling. "What happened?"
"Well, Eva chained Micki up, that was her dog, poor thing, tonight for his after-supper trip outside and a few minutes later she heard this terrible noise, so she grabbed her broom and went rushing out and she found Micki."

Leticia broke into tears that were unwarranted by the simple fact that Mrs. Henderson found Micki.

"Leticia, what happened?"

"Well, she found Micki dead. It looked like a wolf done it, sir, but of course I told her it's too early in the season for the wolves to come down from Canada, if they're coming this year at all, and it was more likely a badger."

Atlee stood in simple amazement at how much she could talk and cry at the same time, before it hit him. A badger? A wolf? His mind raced. Why had he assumed Shrug was imaginary? Because of Richie's description; because something that's tall and strong with lots of teeth and hair that took up with a seven-year-old was imaginary, right?

He felt the blood draining out of his lips, leaving them cold and numb. "Go ahead, Leticia. Joyce and I can muddle through dinner." Very quietly he added, "Take the car."

Leticia nodded. "Mr. Atlee, if it is a wolf, perhaps it might be a good idea to keep a gun around the house. Richie does a lot of puttering around in the fields and such."

"I'll take care of it, Leticia. You go ahead." At least she didn't suspect that Shrug might be the marauder. Not yet anyway.

She left, nearly colliding with Joyce, whose face looked twice her age. "I overheard. It's terrible about Micki, isn't it?" She moved slowly into the room, hugging herself as she walked.

"Stop it, Joyce. We're both thinking the same thing."

He got up like an old man. "We'd better go check."

Richie, who had been listening hidden in a cranny near the staircase, something he had never done before,
sped down the garden steps. He knew his father would come to the tool shed. He toyed with the idea of unlocking the door and telling them to go in, but decided against it. It wasn’t time yet. “Waiting for fullness is,” he muttered, remembering it as a line from Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*. And fullness wasn’t here yet. Then what should be done?

An idea formed, almost independently of him. If they believed Shrug was imaginary, why not reinforce that idea? He leaned against the shed door, brushing his cheek along its rough surface, feeling a oneness with Shrug who waited inside.

Then, very calmly, and very deliberately, he began to talk out loud, knowing his parents were only seconds away. “Come on, Shrug. Come here boy. Atta boy, Shrug.” He petted waist high air. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his parents, still visible in the gathering darkness. His father came forward.

“Hello, son.” His eyes were darting all over the yard. Richie stopped and looked up, and said, “Hello,” and was silent.

His mother moved up beside his father. “What are you doing out here? It’s getting dark.” She tried to smile at him. It was more of a grimace.

Richie looked at her, thinking, no animal ever smiles when it kills. But she would. If she could.

“Playing,” said a part of him far off from his thoughts. “We thought we’d come down and meet your friend Shrug, and be properly introduced.” His father’s eyes landed on the tool shed. “Where is he?”

This is it, for life or death, Richie told himself. “He’s right here, of course,” he said with just the right touch of irritation. Then: “Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot that Shrug is my special friend. He probably isn’t there for you, is he?” He reached down and stroked fur that wasn’t there. Now, the sad, knowing smile. “But he’s there for me, aren’t you boy?”
For a moment Atlee stared at his son. Then he reached out with one hand and touched him on the head. The boy looked so small, so alone, like a small boy should look, like the boy he should be. Atlee managed to say, "OK, son," and ruffle his hair. Then he put one arm around his wife and turned towards the house. "You'd better come in now, son. There may be a wolf prowling around."

"Yes," Richie said quietly. "I heard about Mrs. Henderson's dog." Then he shouted, "Come on, Shrug," as he darted up the path, past his parents, smiling in the darkness.

"Can't I make you change your mind, Leticia? We've had wolves before. A few traps and everything will—"

"This isn't a wolf." She looked at Atlee sharply as if he knew something and was holding back. Then she went to the library window and opened it. A thin watery streak of late afternoon sunlight crawled in. "Listen. You don't hear any birds around anymore, do you?" she said.

"Leticia, it's getting on into winter. What can you expect?"

"Not dead silence, Mr. Atlee. And then there's all those dead animals we've been finding all over the yards."

One pudgy hand fluttered by her face. "I'm too old for this kind of strain. I've got to leave." She headed for the door, then seemed to reconsider. She stopped and very slowly said, "Mr. Atlee, there's something strange going on here, has been for the last few weeks. I wasn't going to say anything for fear you'd call me daft, and maybe I am, but, well ..." she glanced nervously at the doorway as if she were afraid of being overheard. "I've heard noises at night," she whispered.

"Noises? What kind of noises?" Atlee said sharply.

"Things moving out in the yard. Shuffling noises." She took a deep breath. "And Richie—"

"Richie's been doing very well; lately there hasn't been one bad story."
Yes sir.’’ She nibbled on her thick lips. ‘‘But taken to
sneaking around, and staring at you with that look in his
eyes when he thinks you’re not watching him. You know
what I mean,’’ she hurried on, seeing a denial on his lips.
‘‘You know that look. And, well, there’s been food missing
from the kitchen.’’

‘‘Food?’’ he felt himself tense up.

‘‘Yes sir. Mostly meat. Raw meat.’’

‘‘Raw meat!’’ It splattered through his lips, burning
like lava.

‘‘I’ve got to leave,’’ she almost cried. She threw one
hurried goodbye over her shoulder before she disappeared
down the stairs.

Atlee thought for a long time. So we underestimated
him again. He wondered how a seven-year-old could have
corraled an animal that would eat raw meat in the first
place. But Richie had an inventive mind. Highly inventive.

Atlee went to his gun case and began to load a large
hand gun.

Richie, listening from his place near the stairs, felt
panic for the first time. He flew soundlessly down the stairs
and out into the yard. He reached the tool shed breathless,
unable to think coherently.

Unlock the door, a voice told him. Unlock the door and
let Shrug do the rest. But they were his parents.

They are going to kill Shrug, the voice interrupted. It
began to hammer at his brain. Over and over it said: You
don’t want Shrug to die, you don’t want Shrug to die.

He wiped sweat away from his upper lip and leaned
against the door. Suddenly, his mind jerked. He was inside,
pacing in the darkness, all the planning and preparation
useless unless the door was open. For the first time in his
life, he was afraid.
The chanting took on a new, more ominous sound. You don't want to die, you don't want to die... He was in darkness and they were coming for him. He cried out.

His mind twitched once under the smothering blanket and was still. Then, smiling confidently, sure of himself and his power, Richie unlocked the door.

"Richie didn't go to school today. I called his teacher to find out why he wasn't on the bus this afternoon and she said he never showed up. She said she thought he was sick." Joyce's face was pale and the words came rushing from her lips. "Jim, he's been in that tool shed all day. I know it!"

"I'm going out there now." He showed her the gun.

"I'm coming with you. He's my son too."

"He may throw some kind of fit when I shoot whatever it is."

"All the more reason for me to be there. Jim." She touched his arm. "Whatever else he is, he's still my baby. He needs me."

Atlee nodded. "Stay close to me then."

Richie, hiding in the bushes along the path, watched his parents pass by. Saw their weakness and smiled. Saw their stupidity and giggled quietly. Saw their downfall. Richie opened his mouth.

Richie's voice came out shrieking with unholy mirth. But it was Shrug who laughed.